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A key environmental issue is facing the Midwest. Ironically, a majority of the Congress and the president want to deal with the issue, while Sen. John Kerry chose to ignore it. The issue: removing nuclear waste from the shores of Lake Michigan. Over the last generation, the United States built more than 100 nuclear power plants. Illinois has more nuclear reactors than any other state -- 11. Power companies banked on a promise that the radioactive waste from these reactors would one day find a permanent home. Under federal law, everyone who paid an electricity bill was charged an extra fee to fund a permanent storage facility for radioactive waste. By 2003, consumers paid more than \$10 billion while the federal government worked through the process of finding the right place.

In the 1960s, advocates of nuclear power won the national debate when they said that civilian reactors would be clean and safe. After the accidents at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, very few of us would follow this path blindly. As our civilian reactor program accumulated waste, it came time to decide where to put it. Clearly, a permanent home had to be far from cities, in an undisturbed and dry place. President Clinton's secretary of Energy chose a mountain in Nevada where the U.S. military had tested more than 500 nuclear weapons. Every Republican and Democrat in Nevada replied "not in this backyard."

There are good points to be raised in the debate. Today, we transport new nuclear fuel to run reactors. Those shipments pose some risk. If we are to also ship the resulting waste, there will be some risk too. A permanent Nevada storage facility also presents some risk. Radioactive waste remains dangerous for thousands of years. Managing risk over such an extended time is a new and exotic field.

Concerns over a permanent storage facility pale in comparison to the risk we face now and the certainty of an accident if we do nothing. Look, for example, at the Zion reactors up the Lake Michigan shoreline. The reactors are shuttered, and the building that houses radioactive waste is reaching its design life. Stored inside one building is 1,000 tons of highly radioactive waste, just 100 yards from Lake Michigan. If there is an accident, or terrorists attack the facility, Lake Michigan could be poisoned with plutonium.

There are 30 other reactors on the shores of the Great Lakes. The Great Lakes contain the

drinking water for 25 million Americans, including everyone in Chicago. Plutonium contamination of the Great Lakes would threaten millions of Americans and Canadians and would stop the Midwest's economy overnight.

I understand Nevadans who oppose a storage center inside the federal nuclear test site. I do not understand many others who say we should never build a permanent storage facility. The result of their policy would leave thousands of tons of radioactive waste in aging buildings on the shores of the Great Lakes. These radioactive waste storage sites are the top environmental threats to the future of our fresh water supply.

When the U.S. House voted on this issue, majorities of both Democrats and Republicans supported removing the waste from their states. In the Senate, both Senators Dick Durbin and Peter Fitzgerald wisely backed the plan to remove nuclear waste from the shores of the Great Lakes. While campaigning in 2000, Texas Gov. George Bush kept an open mind. As president and following Sept. 11, he realized that leaving nuclear waste at 103 locations near America's cities gave al-Qaida a shooting gallery of targets. Despite the backlash from Nevada, he backed President Clinton's plan to remove waste from lakes and rivers near America's population centers.

This makes the recent statement by Kerry worrying. Vying for the four electoral votes of Nevada, he vowed that a permanent storage facility would never be built: "Not on my watch!" If we are to take him at his word, Kerry would keep tons of radioactive waste in decaying buildings on the shores of Lake Michigan.

We should change his mind. We should explain that the long-term future of the Great Lakes depends on preventing a nuclear accident on Lake Michigan's shore. Over the last four years, I focused a great deal of my time working to remove threats to our lake. We must heed Mayor Daley's call to stop sewage dumping. We need bipartisan backing for federal Clean Air Act enforcement to reduce the lake's mercury pollution. While these efforts are all worthwhile, none of them compare to removing the threat of nuclear waste from Lake Michigan's shoreline. Most Democrats and Republicans agree. Sen. Kerry should join us.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, a Republican who represents Illinois' 10th Congressional District, authored the Great Lakes Mercury Elimination Act.